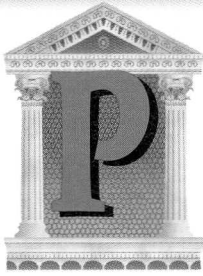


## 9 Plato and Aristotle



**Plato** Like Socrates, Plato was born in Athens and spent his life as a philosopher who searched for truth. Plato was not only a brilliant thinker but also a brilliant writer. He wrote down many of his ideas, and his dialogues are still widely read today.

Plato was about 24 when the Peloponnesian War ended. When Socrates was executed, Plato fled Athens along with other students of Socrates. They felt that they were not welcome in Athens any longer, since their teacher had been executed.

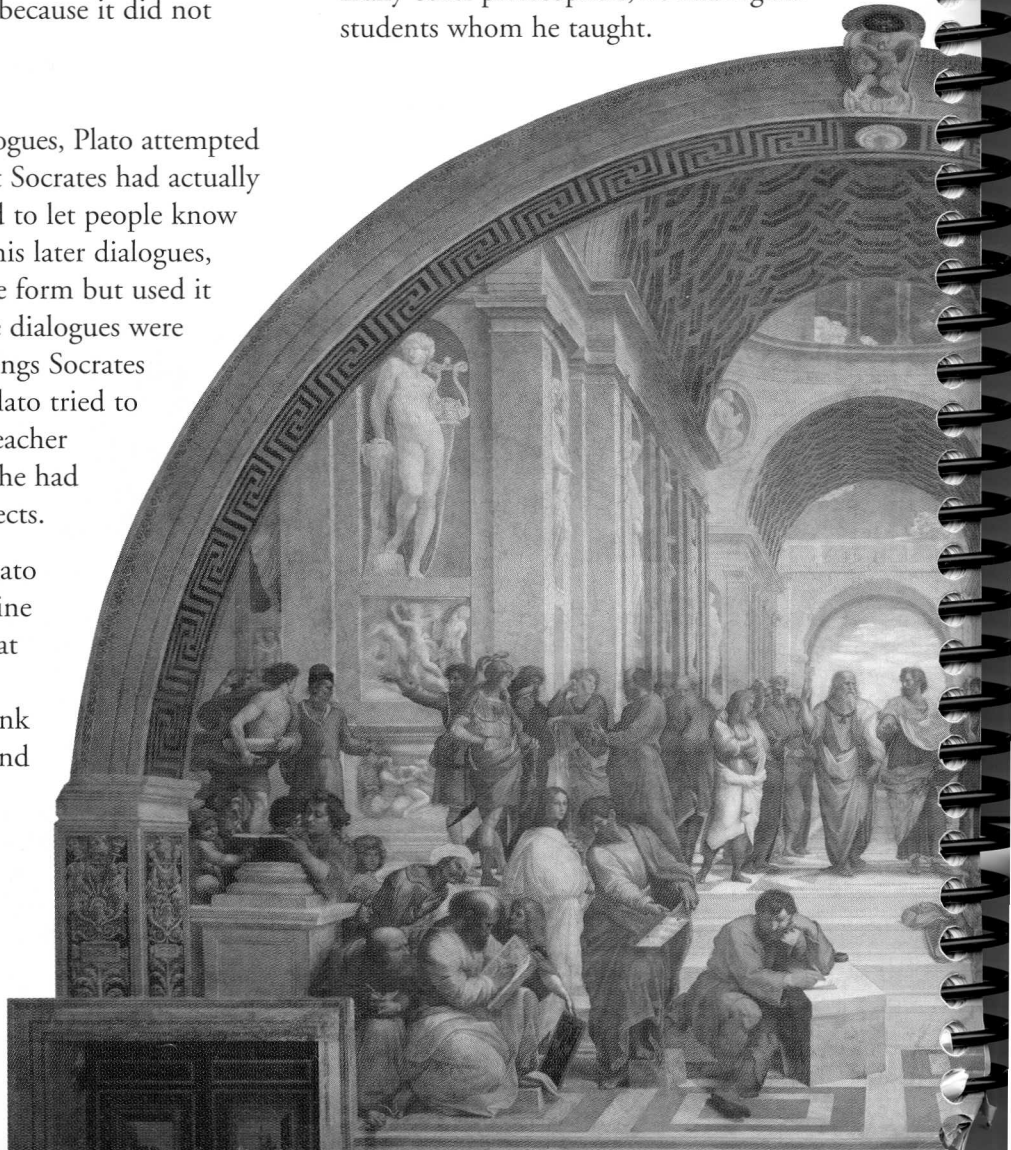
Plato traveled from place to place for a number of years. He even visited Italy and Sicily. Eventually, he returned to Athens and in 387 B.C. started a school called the Academy. This school lasted for more than 900 years, until the Roman emperor Justinian closed it because it did not teach Christianity.

### The Dialogues

In some of his early dialogues, Plato attempted to record conversations that Socrates had actually had with others. He wanted to let people know what Socrates had said. In his later dialogues, Plato preserved the dialogue form but used it to treat new subjects. These dialogues were not necessarily based on things Socrates had actually said. Rather, Plato tried to imagine what his beloved teacher Socrates might have said if he had thought about various subjects.

By writing dialogues, Plato allowed his readers to imagine that they were part of a great philosophical conversation. He encouraged them to think about their own opinions and ideas, and he showed them that they could use reason to discover truth.

Although Plato wrote Socratic dialogues, his way of searching for truth and trying to understand goodness was a little different from the methods of Socrates. Plato was more idealistic than Socrates. He spent more time trying to understand what the ideal of goodness was and less time trying to help people recognize whether they were actually living it. Plato was also more traditional in his teaching methods. He didn't confront people in the street or marketplace. Like many other philosophers, he had regular students whom he taught.



Before people could study with Plato, they had to have mastered mathematics. Plato admired mathematics because he thought math led to pure, **abstract** truth. He was not as interested in examining the everyday world, which seemed so imperfect and filled with wrongdoing. Plato suggested that there were actually two worlds: a perfect one of “forms” or ideals, which were how things *really* were, and the world that we actually live in, where things are merely imperfect copies of the “forms.” “Beyond this world of decay and motion,” he wrote, “the eternal being of the Idea rests.” For Plato, the purpose of philosophy was to identify the perfect forms that life really has in its ideal state. When people studied mathematics and philosophy, they would learn what things really are like, and then they could strive toward this perfection.

Plato felt that philosophers should play the central role in society because they alone understood the meaning of truth and justice. He did not believe in democracy because he thought it gave power to people who did not understand justice—who did wicked things, like execute Socrates.

Plato wanted society to be like a school, in which citizens spent

their lives training to be good people (just as in Sparta they trained to be good soldiers). He designed an ideal state, ruled by philosophers and dedicated to justice. Here, citizens could develop **virtue** within themselves and choose goodness. Plato believed that the right kind of education would teach citizens to control themselves, to act for the good of others, and to be less selfish. His long dialogue *The Republic* describes his ideal state.

#### **vocabulary**

**abstract** pure

and simple, not complicated

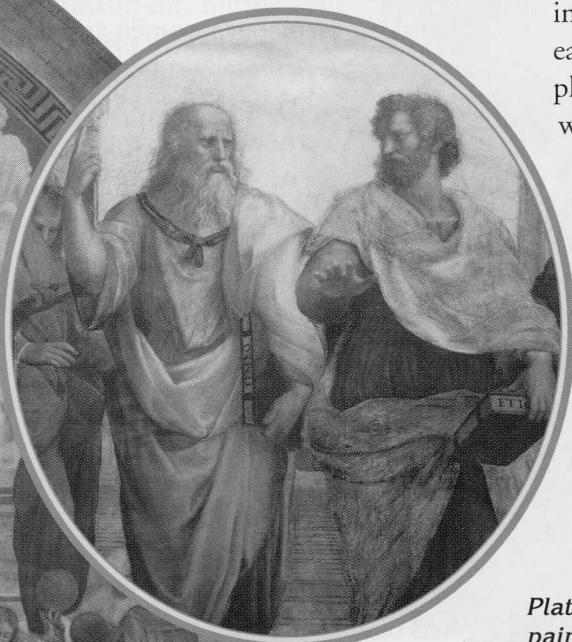
**virtue** goodness or moral excellence

During the lifetime of Socrates, philosophers were involved in the life of the polis. They tried to educate citizens and get them involved. By the time Plato was teaching and writing, things had changed a little. The role of the philosopher was still to train citizens, but it was also important for a philosopher to use his knowledge to point out how society was not always what it could be. Philosophers taught in schools rather than conversing in the marketplace or debating in the Assembly. They tried to identify what was wrong with society and made suggestions for how it could be better. However, they were not directly involved in the everyday life of the polis the way earlier philosophers had been. When the great philosopher Aristotle came along, he changed what philosophers did and how they worked even more.

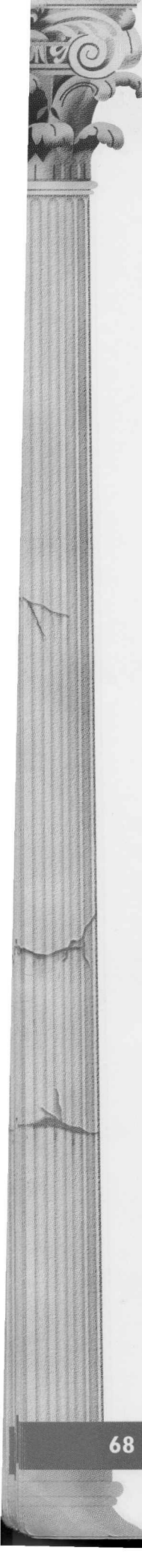
#### **Aristotle**

Just as Socrates found a great student in Plato, so Plato found a great student in Aristotle. Aristotle was born around 384 B.C. in Macedonia, a country north of Greece. There, his father had been a doctor in the court of the king, Amyntas III. When Aristotle came to Athens, he studied with

*Plato and Aristotle are the central figures in this painting called “The School of Athens.” It was painted by the Italian Renaissance artist Raphael.*







Plato and stayed at Plato's school for 20 years before starting his own school, called the Lyceum (lye SEE um).

Aristotle was greatly influenced both by his father and by Plato. His father had influenced him because, in ancient times, knowledge and skills were passed from father to son. Since Aristotle's father had been a doctor, he had taught Aristotle to observe people and the world around him carefully. A doctor had to take careful note of a patient's symptoms in order to understand what was making a patient sick.

As for Plato, he taught Aristotle how important abstract ideals and knowledge are. Aristotle and Plato did not always agree and argued with each other from time to time. Aristotle admired Plato greatly, but he once said, "Plato is dear to me, but dearer still is truth."

### **A Keen Observer**

Aristotle also added to the knowledge of his day by collecting and examining insects, animals, and plants. He loved to study animals and dissected more than 50 different types of animals himself in order to learn about them.

From his years of careful observation, Aristotle realized that there is always more than one way to explain things. An animal, for example, could be understood by what it looked like, what it was made of, how it moved, and what it could do. All these different explanations were important and necessary.

Aristotle didn't know it, but by collecting facts, analyzing them, and coming up with theories about his observations, he was developing the basics of scientific research. Although Aristotle didn't go as far as later philosophers did in testing out his ideas, and although some of his ideas turned out to be wrong, he helped move philosophy down the path that would eventually lead to modern science.

Like other philosophers, Aristotle also wrote about what it meant to lead a good and just life. He believed that the purpose of life was to exercise one's abilities and virtues reasonably. In his

book *Nicomachean* (nihk oh MAK ee un) *Ethics*, he said, "Virtue, therefore, is a kind of moderation or mean as it aims at the mean or moderate amount." Aristotle meant that people should avoid extremes of all kinds. Just as they should eat neither too much nor too little, so they should avoid both evil deeds on the one hand and self-righteousness on the other. The truly virtuous man would be neither cowardly nor foolishly brave. Aristotle wrote, "It is possible to feel fear, confidence, desire, anger, pity—but to feel these emotions at the right times, on the right occasions, and toward the right people in the right ways is the best course." This idea of living moderately is sometimes called the golden mean.

Aristotle also examined politics, or the life of the state. He was interested in determining what kinds of governments are best—that is, which governments care for the citizens and not just the rulers. So he inspected dozens of city-states. In his book, *The Politics*, Aristotle wrote that the purpose of the state was to make "the good life" possible for its citizens. The state should create a society in which people could live nobly, honorably, and well.

### **A Man of His Time**

Aristotle was a man of his time, however, and he did not believe that all people were equal. He valued men above women and believed that aristocrats were morally superior to nonaristocrats. He also believed in slavery. He felt that a slave was the property of the slaveowner just as a tool was his property.

Aristotle's influence lasted for centuries. During the European Middle Ages, he was so important that he was referred to simply as "the Philosopher."

The great Athenian philosophers, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, taught each other to use reason to examine their lives, society, and the world around them. Much of what we know and think about today is based on the principles of reason and observation that began with these philosophers of ancient Greece.